

IOS Lister's Corner 2007

Year Lists: 2007 & Alltime Big Years

Below are 43 tallies from 19 different birders who have hit 300 or more in one year. Sixteen of these tallies (37%!) have come from just two birders - Keith McMullen and the late Bob Chapel. Of great significance, Keith set the second highest big year tally in Illinois history with his 318 effort! In honor of these two great Big Year birders, we present Keith's account of his Big Year as well as a personal letter from Bob, in which he responded to a request for info on his 2000 Big Year (the second highest tally on record at that time) along with his advice on how to do a Big Year for those interested in some of his 'secrets.' This letter has never before been made public, but it seems an appropriate time for it to be released.

Key: • = list submitted

(updated 3/4/08; compiled by Eric Walters & Joe Lill)

2007 Illinois Year List

A number of new names are appearing in the 250+ totals, which could suggest future attempts at 300+ might be tried by them. Congratulations to Keith and Dan, both of whom had tremendous tallies over 300, a feat both have achieved more than once in the past. Keith's was the 2nd highest tally on record while Dan's ties the 17th best in Illinois history.

318	Keith McMullen
308	Dan Kassebaum
292	Eric Walters
286	Bruce Heimer
284	Travis Mahan
282	Jeffrey Sanders
281	Dan Williams
281	Geoffrey A. Williamson
280	Craig Taylor
279	Mike Madsen
279	Alan Stokie
278	Bob Fisher
271	Douglas Stotz
270	Jeff Chapman
267	Tim Kuesel
263	Jeff Skrentny
262	Karen Fisher
257	Darrell Shambaugh
257	Christine Williamson
256	John McKee
256	Jim Mountjoy
251	Urs Geiser
243	Thad Edmonds
236	Joe Lill
230	Jeff Sundberg
221	Cindy Alberico
216	David K. Antieau
216	Anthony Friend
211	Cyndi Lubecke

My Biggest Year

by Keith McMullen

Only the few Illinois birders who really know me understand when I say, "I'm not doing a Big Year." I explain that I do not do Big Years. In my estimation, the birding that I do in any given year within the State is consistent and a set routine, year after year after year! Therefore, this should help explain the fact that, in 2007, I recorded over 300 species in Illinois for the 9th year in a row. I do attempt to reach my goal of 300 species for the year, but I certainly had no intentions of trying for the Illinois Big Year record of 322 species set by Bob Fisher back in 2004.

My birding year for 2007 certainly was one I'll never forget. In fact, I may never record a higher yearly total in Illinois. I tallied 318 species, good for 2nd place all-time behind Bob's 322 species.

There were three species I recorded in 2007 that were Illinois life birds so, obviously, they stand out as memorable moments in time. The first, Purple Sandpiper, recorded January 10th at Waukegan's Government Pier, was a species that had long been a nemesis bird for me. Truthfully, I was starting to think this bird didn't really exist even though numerous Illinois birders have long enjoyed excellent views of this elusive shorebird. Thanks to Jenny Vogt, who located the bird and got me quickly focused on the rocks this bird was using while Lake Michigan's waves came crashing in. Finally, a Purple Sandpiper!

Next was the Black-Headed Gull, seen March 3rd in Montrose Harbor in Chicago. Not only was this bird an Illinois lifer, it was a lifer, period. I never expected to see one anywhere in Illinois and certainly didn't expect to get photos! Not to be outdone was the Slaty-backed Gull discovered by my good birding friend, Dan Kassebaum, on December 16th at Carlyle Lake. Again, another bird I never expected to see in Illinois but, thanks to Dan's keen eyesight and his dedication to finding rare species at Carlyle, I was able to join the crew of birders who got to see this awesome gull.

Those three species certainly were highlights because they were lifers. But when you record 318 species in a given year, there are many highlights, for many

different reasons. The January 1st Snowy Owl, found by another birding pal, Craig Litteken, along the interstate highway in Madison County was significant in that it was Craig's lifer Snowy Owl, but also because the next day, it was struck by a car. Sadly, it died at the rehabilitation center two days later. The Reddish Egret seen May 20th at the Chicago Botanic Garden was a thrill because I was actually in Chicago for several days of birding when this beauty was discovered. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! I recorded all three jaegers, all three phalaropes and all three scoters.

As the year started to wind down, I found myself looking to add more species with the idea that, possibly, I could record 315 species, which would break my own personal high of 314 species in a year. I honestly did not believe I'd be able to record 322 species or even 320 species, for that matter. I had my chances to find additional species. I made a few trips for good birds that had been reported, such as Clark's Nutcracker, Northern Goshawk, White-winged Crossbill, just to name a few. Of course, the big miss had to be the Wilson's Plover. I simply didn't have the time to make that trip.

In summary, it was a blast to find 318 species last year. However, I really did nothing different from any other year. I made my usual mid-Spring trip to Chicago. I ventured north for my first Gull Frolic (I came back again in February 2008!). I birded extreme Southern Illinois in April and May for all my neotropical migrants. I certainly benefited from all the good finds of my birding pals, Dan Kassebaum, Mark Seiffert and Travis Mahan. I probably added 10 species thanks to their timely phone calls or email messages.

So the next time you see me in the field and ask, "Are you doing another Big Year?" I'll definitely smile and tell you the same thing I say every year, "No, I never do Big Years!" However, those who know me well, know that I'll be doing a "Keith year," which translates to "a goal of 300" within the state for that given year!

Progression of the IL Big Year Record

75+	Robert Kennicott	c.1855
100+	F. Dayton	c.1895
117	Herbert & Alice Walter	1897
162+	Benjamin T. Gault	c.1925
170	William Dreuth	1932
182	William Dreuth	1933
187	William Dreuth	1937
203	William Dreuth	1938
225+	Charles C. Clark	c.1960
241	Betty & Harry Shaw	1970
290	Larry Balch	1971
308	Richard Biss	1978
314	Kevin Richmond	1986
317	Robert Chapel	1996
322	Bob Fisher	2004

Alltime Big Year Lists (over 300)

322	Bob Fisher	2004•
318	Keith McMullen	2007•
317	Robert Chapel	1996•
316	Karen Fisher	2004•
315	Robert Chapel	2000•
314	Keith McMullen	2004•
314	Kevin Richmond	1986•
314	Alan Stokie	2003•
310	Louise Augustine	1986•
310	Alan Stokie	2004•
309	Robert Chapel	1998
309	Dan Kassebaum	1996•
309	Travis Mahan	2003•
309	Michael Retter	1999•
309	Alan Stokie	2005•
309	Eric Walters	1990•
308	Richard Biss	1978
308	Dan Kassebaum	2007•
307	Tom Pucelik	1983
306	Robert Chapel	1999
306	Robert Chapel	2001
306	Keith McMullen	2000
306	Adam Reyburn	1999
305	Robert Chapel	1995•
305	Dan Kassebaum	2003•
305	Kevin Richmond	1985
304	Dan Kassebaum	2000•
303	Robert Chapel	1997
303	Keith McMullen	2001
303	Keith McMullen	2006
302	Louise Augustine	1988•
302	Keith McMullen	2005
302	Jeffrey Sanders	2005•
302	Eric Secker	2004
302	Eric Walters	1989
301	Myrna Deaton	1988
301	Todd Fink	1994
301	Mike Madsen	2005•
301	Keith McMullen	2003
300	Myrna Deaton	1994
300	Keith McMullen	1999•
300	Alan Stokie	1999
300	Keith McMullen	2002

How to Have a Successful Big Year

*by Robert Chapel
(from a letter dated January 30, 2001)*

I did not start out doing a big year (which is why I did not chase the Eurasian Wigeon). However, I did have some good birds for Spring and late Winter, which I usually don't find until Fall, such as the Black-legged Kittiwake and Little Gull, and it was a good Spring for shorebirds as well. Also, the Winter of 1999-2000 was good for winter finches. During the Spring, I found all the regular sparrows except Harris's Sparrow. The good early parts of the year meant there was less to look for

in the Fall and I could concentrate on birds missing from the year's list. By the end of May I was over 280 (maybe 290) for the year. I had over 300 (I think 305) by the time I chased the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in mid-August, but things really slowed down in the Fall, partly because there weren't that many new birds to see for the year.

Since IBET began, finding birds throughout the state, and therefore having 300+ year lists has become easier. In pre-IBET days, a birder had to plan out a Big Year and line up contacts throughout the State, then hope the calls came in. Often there were big misses because of lack of contacts. I recall that before I knew Rich Biss, he did a Big Year, but missed Carolina Wren (a rarity at the time), even though I knew where there was a Carolina Wren, because he did not have me as a contact.

Another factor that I have found has aided me in Big Years is having birded the whole state and having at least a passable knowledge of birds and birding sites throughout the state. In several circumstances, this has aided me in finding birds that even the local birders had not located yet. As an example, one year I needed Long-tailed Ducks for my year list and was in Chicago for some other birds. Although it was near the time for Long-taileds to be showing up, no one had found them yet. Hoping to not have to make a second trip for just that species, I checked areas that I knew from past experience had been particularly reliable for them and found them.

Being a field note editor has helped me sometimes, too. Again, one year after receiving field notes I realized that there was a Harlequin Duck that was persistently hanging around at Gillson Park, even though it was not updated on the bird alert or IBET, because it was being reported only at very great intervals by different birders, usually as a one-time sighting. I was, therefore, also able to look for and locate the bird. It also pays to talk to local birders you see on trips, as you can find out about other unusual birds. On the same trip as above, I received word about a Spotted Towhee at Max McGraw Wildlife Fund area and was able to go view it at the feeder. This year, I found out about a Tricolored Heron while looking at a Glossy Ibis (it was placed on IBET after I checked it).

It seems to me, to have an excellent Big Year, one has to plan to bird the entire state and have a working knowledge of birding throughout the state, so as to be able to find a good variety of birds without being dependent on others. Yet, one should also make contacts with other birders, pay attention to IBET and other alerts, and also converse with other birders in the field whenever possible.